

WRITING RETREATS AS THIRD SPACES

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ABSTRACT

Much has been written on the importance of writing retreats in providing the conditions for productive writing, away from the demands of everyday academic life. Most authors, however, acknowledge that even though retreats may result in positive outcomes, they are also complex social spaces which participants may experience as challenging. One, perhaps different, way to understand these difficulties is that they are the sorts of differences typical of a form of learning space known as a 'third space'. In such spaces, as seen through an Activity Theory lens, differences can be understood as drivers for collaborative learning and development. Theorising writing retreats as third spaces within an Activity Theory framework then opens up ways to potentially enhance participants' learning experiences.

Keywords: Writing retreats, difference, third spaces, Activity Theory.

INTRODUCTION

Writing retreats away from the humdrum of institutional work are generally acknowledged as supportive of staff and instrumental in developing writers' 'voice' as well as providing staff with a pleasurable experience (Grant 2006). Evaluations of writing retreats are 'almost universally positive' (Moore, Murphy and Murray 2010, 21). Staff value the time away, often in beautiful settings and appreciate the support from peers and more experienced staff (Savin-Baden 2008), as attested by these two staff involved in the retreats reported on in this research:

I appreciated the space to shut myself away. The venue was wonderful, it helped in creating an environment where I could focus purely on writing.

and:

This was one of the most useful workshops I have attended. The opportunity to attend it in serene and secure setting was much appreciated.

Though the benefits of writing retreats as safe spaces conducive to writing may be true, authors also refer to some of the obstacles staff experience in writing. For example, Moore (2003) describes how writers feel they lack experience in writing, yet are expected to produce

publishable articles. Lee and Boud (2003) characterise writing programmes as *sites of struggle* as writers attempt to overcome their fear of failure, often matched by a strong desire to overcome such difficulty through collective activity. However, although the often difficult and contradictory nature of writing for publication is acknowledged, such contradictions and how academics may work productively with them, is not specifically addressed.

In this research, the sense of unhappiness related to writing on retreats emerges quite strongly, often in contradiction to more positive experiences. It is this contradictory nature of the experiences which writers on retreats undergo that the author wishes to highlight and explore. In short, contradictory feelings and experiences may set up opportunities for development. In Activity Theory terms, they set up opportunities for questioning, reflection and may even lead to periods of new or expansive learning (Engeström and Sannino 2011).

The research reported on here draws its data from early career staff's reflections on their experiences of attending a particular form of structured writing retreat. The purpose is not, however, to evaluate the retreats as has been done extensively in the past (see for example, Grant 2006; Moore, Murphy and Murray 2010). Rather it is to illustrate how reference to staff's experiences can be used to locate the retreats within a particular type of 'learning space' (Savin-Baden 2008), characterised by difficulty and contestation. Such learning spaces, in which difficulties are seen as potentially developmental as they are worked on collectively and purposefully, can be described through the Activity Theory related concept of 'third spaces' (Gutierrez 2008).

It must be pointed out that there are other conceptualisations of third space that do not draw on Activity Theory. Bhabha (1994), for example, understands third space as a site of resistance to more dominant, often colonial, cultures. In engaging in resistance actors may have to reconstruct previously firmly held identities. Soja (1980), on the other hand, approaches third spaces from the position of Cultural Geography, in that they are made up of physical and social dimensions, but are also potentially transformed through the actions of people who inhabit them. In both cases, third spaces are seen as being fluid and open-ended in nature: they emerge through the existence of prior differences, as is also the case with the way Gutierrez describes such spaces. However, I have chosen to focus on the Activity-influenced conceptualisation of third space from Gutierrez, in which contradictions and mediated zones of proximal development play a central role.

The argument made in this article is that the concept of third spaces provides us, firstly, with a lens to better understand the complex and contradictory nature of writing retreats. Secondly, through understanding the retreats in this way, it is possible to predict some of the

difficulties that may arise, so that mentoring and writing staff can be better prepared for the obstacles to writing they may encounter.

The article thus begins with a description of the structure of the writing retreats and the nature of the participants as early career academics. The concept of learning spaces, and more specifically third spaces, is then explained. Following on, data gathered from staff's evaluations of the retreats is then selectively presented to illustrate third space properties. This evaluative data is thus used to help interrogate the 'spaces' of writing retreats as third spaces from a predominantly Activity Theory perspective. Finally, suggestions are made as to how this way of understanding the retreats can be fruitfully used in designing and implementing writing retreats more generally.

Context of the writing retreats

The focus of this article is on writing retreats aimed at a specific group of academic staff involved with teaching on foundation programme initiatives at universities; these programmes are designed for students who meet the minimum requirements for admission but are identified as being potentially at risk of failure, for example they only just meet these requirements. Early foundation curricula, from their beginnings in the early 1980s into early 2000, tended to focus on getting students prepared for study in the mainstream, often focussing on thinking skills, general language and numeracy skills and reinforcing school content knowledge that was assumed to be absent or inadequately understood. Thus staff were often recruited for their perceived teaching ability in the schooling sector, or were recruited from the junior ranks of academia (Volbrecht and Boughey 2004). Neither grouping was particularly academically strong, nor did they necessarily have extensive experience of teaching tertiary level disciplines, and could be described as 'early career academics' (Dwyer, Lewis, McDonald and Burns 2012, 131). Seen in this way, there are thus high stakes in developing this group of staff both as academics and teachers.

Consequently, from 2007 onwards, universities offering foundation provision were awarded an annual, ring-fenced subsidy specifically for foundation staff development. The purpose of the funding, based on the recommendations of a Working Group, was to '... improve institutions' understanding of foundation provision and to assist institutions to share best practice' (Ministerial Letter to the Vice-Chancellors, dated 21/9/07), in other words an educational development focus. More specific guidelines suggested that the funding be used for a variety of staff development initiatives, including writing for publication retreats.

The foundation staff who attended these writing retreats were heterogeneous in terms of

levels of knowledge and skill, as well as their disciplinary fields and institutional affiliations. Staff were drawn from the four universities of the Western Cape region, all of which offer foundation programmes. Two of the universities can be classified as more traditional research-intensive, one as an emerging research university and one as a university of technology. What all the staff had in common was that they were ‘transgressing’ (Savin-Baden 2008) from their disciplinary fields into the field of higher education.

In cross-cultural studies, differences between social groupings confronted by similar social problems, is often seen as a barrier to productive development (Muller 2001). Similarly, it might be expected that heterogeneity of writing retreat participants would be a barrier to mutual development and learning. However, in reviewing retreat evaluations, staff generally valued heterogeneity as it allowed them to reflect on practices from other universities. Grant (2006) made a similar observation in her reflections on inter-institutional workshops.

The retreats were residential and conducted in a comfortable rural hotel. They stretched over three days. Participants had their own private room and writing space, as well as a variety of communal writing spaces and a main workshop teaching room. There was also opportunity for relaxation activities such as walking, swimming and sauna facilities. Though these comforts may seem ‘trite’, Grant (2006) reports on the importance of comfortable spaces in creating productive retreats.

In broad strokes, the workshops can be characterized as having a structured focus presented by the workshop mentors/presenters on ‘rhetorical moves’ (Swales 2004) for writing articles; presentations were followed by small group peer and mentor review of the writing that participants had brought to the workshops (see Paxton in this volume for a more detailed explanation of the structured nature of the workshops). The mentors/presenters were staff whose field of study was teaching and learning and had substantive publishing experience. After presenting, the mentors acted as readers and discussants for the foundation staff participants (writers). In the retreats discussed here, peer review was structured in timetabled sessions after writers had the opportunity to rewrite first drafts according to structured input. The ratio of mentors/presenters to writers was approximately 1:4. Peer review was largely informal, and individual writers paired up with others they thought could offer useful feedback; the participants structured when this would occur. Some guidance was given by the presenters as to how to give and receive feedback constructively, and suggestions were made regarding suitable pairings. In addition, there were regular sharing sessions with the whole group, and much informal discussion in communal activities such as eating and walking.

This structure was seen as important to scaffold early career academics and/or those who

were unfamiliar with the discipline of educational research. Although not necessarily overtly spoken about, the retreats were framing writing as being about developing the writer's voice. Voice was broadly understood by the presenters/mentors as an interplay between accepted theory/theorists, and the particular stance taken by the author (Savin-Baden 2008).

Lee and Boud (2003) advocate that academic writing should be situated within a system of structured peer review. Such peer review can build confidence in writers, as it is relatively non-threatening, coming from other writers who are themselves engaged in struggling to write; this quality is enhanced by the feedback being reciprocal.

Learning spaces, third spaces

Mannix (2015) typifies learning spaces for academics in higher education as, firstly, being *bounded*, as in formal days away at conferences. Though there is some element of collective thinking and discussion, the spaces are more often than not dominated by formal presentation. In this sense, learning is understood as relatively context-bound. Alternatively, however, academic learning spaces may be more social and informal (Mannix 2015). In the retreats described here, there are both more bounded and structured presentations by the workshop organisers, as well as more loosely coupled discussions and opportunities for private writing by the participants.

Savin-Baden (2008, 13), drawing on the work of Deleuze and Guatarri, characterizes more bounded learning spaces as 'striated', in that they possess a degree of organisation, outcomes and inputs. However, newcomers encountering such spaces do not come in empty handed, but with knowledge and practices drawn from prior contexts, and there may be gaps between these contexts; the old context is then a potential resource to use in the new context. In such a model, learning is very much relational, not just between old and new contexts, but also as it is enacted in the ebb and flow of movement of ideas within the retreats. Learning thus co-emerges (Edwards 2005) as a result of activities undergone between different participants, mentors and the artefacts provided by them, for example article structure as presented at the retreats. Such dynamics can transform the learning spaces from striated to 'smooth'. Smooth learning spaces are open-ended, dynamic, social and contested. Staff engaged in such spaces are constantly 'on the move', discovering new ways of thinking and doing and, in so doing, again potentially re-creating their own sense of self (Savin-Baden 2008, 13).

Third spaces (Gutierrez 2008; Gutierrez, Baquedano-Lopez and Tejeda 1999) have much in common with Savin-Baden's concept of smooth learning spaces in higher education, in that they are often riven with conflict; but they are also spaces for open discussion and learning.

Gutierrez (1999) highlights how tensions may in turn lead to productive development in literacy practices. Third spaces involve the bringing together of different participants from different constituencies (for example disciplinary backgrounds, levels of experience in writing) for a particular purpose (for example, writing). Yet it is these very differences, as individuals attempt to make sense of new contexts, which can be mobilised as resources for further learning, beyond what one or other of the participants already knows; participants have ‘varied trajectories and challenges’ (Gutierrez 2008, 154). Difference amongst participants is thus a stimulus for development and learning, and the gap that emerges between the different groupings constitutes a learning zone, or a zone of proximal development or ZPD (Engeström and Sannino 2011; Gutierrez 2008) in which new ways of doing and understanding can be collectively constructed, drawing on the original differences of the participants.

Learning and development has typically in the past been understood almost exclusively as vertical development (Gutierrez 2008) between a less refined, often more common sense understanding, to a more advanced theoretical understanding that can be transferred between contexts. Such development can be understood as occurring in the gap between what the individual knows and what is known as acceptable by more expert social groups. This may well be the case in retreats, where experienced writers give presentations on writing articles, but there is also recognition of more horizontal development which is not necessarily more theoretically advanced. Examples of such horizontal development would include participants transferring prior knowledge of writing to the new situation in the retreat, or engaging with other colleagues from different universities and fields. There is again what can be described as a sense of disruption, as writers move into new spaces. Such horizontal developments are typical of learning in third spaces. Gutierrez (2008, 149) underlines one particular form of ‘horizontal development’ which emerges in third spaces, that of the development of sociocritical literacy. In fact, Gutierrez goes so far as to state that such a literacy may be the desired outcome of learning in third spaces. Developing sociocritical literacy involves the purposeful bringing together of students’ ‘outside’ social, historical and cultural knowledge and the more codified ‘inside’ disciplinary knowledge of school/university teachers. Through examining differences and contradictions between these knowledges, it is then possible to coax students into ‘reframing’ school or university disciplines and canons, through the lens of their outside lived experiences.

In order for such development to occur, there is a need for actors to partially suspend what is known from previous contexts in entering into newer ones. Academic staff on writing retreats thus may enter into what Savin-Baden (2008, 75) refers to as a ‘liminal zone’, somewhere

between ways of doing and thinking proposed by ‘experts’ and their own ways of acting. The liminal zone is an equivalent term to the ZPD. However, the main difference is that within a ZPD, there is active mediation, often from more experienced others or through other artefacts, to support development (Engeström and Sannino 2011). It could be suggested that creating conditions for liminality/ZPD is necessary, in order that participants on writing retreats can develop their authorial voice, that ‘both reflects individuality and locates our position within the academic community’ (Savin-Baden 2008, 43). Developing voice in writing retreats is, in turn, commensurate with developing a sociocritical literacy in Gutierrez’s third space theorisation.

Gutierrez’s third space conception draws much of its inspiration from Activity Theory. This is evident in Gutierrez’s (2008) reference to Activity Theory concepts such as artefact mediated learning, ZPD, contradictions and ‘ascending from the abstract to the concrete’ (Gutierrez 2008, 149). Activity Theory is a theory of learning and transformation of both individuals and of the social systems which they inhabit (for example the system of a workplace or of a writing retreat). Differences or contradictions within social systems are a central tenet of Activity Theory (Engeström 1999) and are also highlighted in Gutierrez’s work.

Activity Theory, however, often has a more nuanced understanding of ‘difference’ than that expressed by Gutierrez (2008) in her descriptions of third spaces. According to Engeström and Sannino (2011), every activity system (for example a workplace, a classroom or university) in modern industrial society is characterized by fundamental, historically-based contradictions or tensions between use and exchange value. Within the university field and the practices of writing, the tension could be understood as existing between staff’s desire to develop themselves as academics, including a ‘writerly’ identity, and the university’s need for increasing numbers of research outputs (Devlin and Radloff 2014). Flowing from this fundamental contradiction of a push for production, are secondary contradictions such as feelings of fear and inadequacy. The aim of any developmental initiative within the system would then, firstly, be to fully understand the fundamental and secondary contradictions. Secondly, participants in the system would collectively work on new forms of activity which acknowledge and work in-between these contradictions. However, it is still possible, as Blackler (1993) suggests, to use the approach of development through encountering contradictions without reference to Engeström’s fundamental contradictions, and this is the position taken in third space studies. Participants in third spaces are understood to potentially be able to do more as part of the purposeful, object-orientated collective than they would be able to do on their own, in more individual spaces typical of academia (Lee and Boud 2003;

Gutierrez 2008). Making third spaces operational as ZPDs involves mediation by a variety of tools. Where emerging difference or difficulty is a stimulus for development and learning, the dynamic of the collective in the retreat is a tool to work on these difficulties, as is the input from more expert writers or literature on article writing. These different sorts of tools tend to favour different forms of development.

In summary then, third spaces are characterised as being fundamentally dialogical, in that different ideas and perspectives are brought forward and these in turn derive from the diverse nature of the participants. Participants are encouraged to work collaboratively on these differences, often through raising them as difficulties or contradictions, which can in addition create spaces for ‘transformative’ learning within zones of proximal development (Gutierrez 2008, 152). As Gutierrez et al. (1999, 287) suggests, it is precisely the diverse nature of participants and the ensuing hybridity that provides the ‘building blocks’ of third spaces.

DATA SOURCES AND METHODOLOGY

Much of the current research into writing retreats seeks to explore attendees’ gains and impediments to writing, through reflective accounts or questionnaires on the retreats. These methods fall largely within the ambit of what could be called ‘evaluation research’, as researchers seek to make claims about the worth of the retreats (Cousins 2009). For example, Moore (2003) distributed questionnaires about retreat participants’ experiences of writing before the retreat and what benefits they believed they had accrued post-retreat immediately after attending. Grant (2006) also used questionnaires to evaluate writers’ experiences of the retreats, but requested these months after the workshops were concluded. The questions themselves related to the goals the author had set for the retreats, for example to help participants gain greater ease and pleasure in their writing or to develop a ‘writerly’ voice. Devlin and Radloff (2014) posed more open-ended questions after the retreat, asking staff to discuss any developments and changes they had undergone, which could be ascribed to attending the retreat.

In this research, different participants in three distinct writing retreats over a three year period were asked to set goals at the start of the retreat, then to spend 15 minutes or so at the end of the retreat reflecting on whether/how well they thought that they had achieved these goals. In the third writing retreat, additional questions asking participants to describe their feelings about writing on the retreat, were also set. Altogether there were 38 participant evaluations collected from the retreats. Although the more general evaluations were useful, the question about emotions provided a rich source of data. This was not surprising, as Dwyer et

al. (2012) remind us: academic life, and in particular writing, is often experienced as emotionally difficult and taxing, a position supported by Grant (2006).

Even though evaluation data was used in this research, the purpose was not to ascertain what had worked well/not so well in the retreats. Rather the purpose was to investigate the extent to which writing retreats can be described as ‘third spaces’ (Gutierrez et al. 1999). To this end, evaluative data and data more specifically concerning writers’ feelings about writing, was matched to some of the main characteristics of third space learning dynamics, as described by Gutierrez (2008) and Gutierrez et al. (1999) in the previous section, namely:

- Dialogic or collaborative learning;
- Diversity and the extent to which this afforded collaborative learning;
- Difficulties and contradictions experienced by participants;
- Difficulties as possible sources of learning and development;
- Future-looking learning and intentionality emerging from the retreats.

DATA ANALYSIS

In analysing the data, I sought to identify staff’s reference to practices which are known to typically occur in third spaces. In so doing I was conscious that not all the data spoke to the overall theme of third spaces. Some of this alternative data is represented at the beginning of the article, for example participating staff’s experiences of retreats as comfortable. However, apart from some staff valuing both solitary writing and group activity, I found no counter evidence to the depiction of these particular retreats as third spaces.

Dialogic learning

Role of mentors

Dwyer et al. (2012) suggest that having more experienced mentors in the retreats can be problematic as this sets up a hierarchy of expertise, and novice writers tend to see themselves as relatively unable to write. However, Grant (2006) reports that having a mix of experienced and less experienced writers is conducive to collaborative writing, partly because novices can see that the more experienced writers go through many of the same struggles as they do. Such learning from more expert practitioners was earlier characterised as vertical learning (Gutierrez 2008).

Often new researchers are intimidated by the discourse of experienced researchers in the field. At the retreat it opened up a space to get to know experienced researchers from whom we could learn and get fresh ideas.

and:

Through reading the work of others and paying attention to how role models like supervisors write. This offered guidance in terms of substantive skills.

Role of diversity of peers

Grant (2006) describes her writing retreats as transgressive since, unlike normative university practices, people from different departments or even institutions come together. The writing retreats challenge the assumption, often held by academics, that writing is best seen as a solitary process, which is what most academics experience in writing their theses and articles, often only seen by peers after they have been published. ‘The price we pay for the practice of solitary writing is that we often doubt ourselves, we feel as if we lack courage or commitment, we find writing lonely and hard’ (Grant 2006, 494). This sentiment is further reflected in the experiences of staff on the retreat.

The diversity of the group provides the chance for a wide variety of perspectives and interests to be represented, and potentially broadens the outlook of participants. Moore, Murphy and Murray (2010) describe how aspirant writers take great pleasure and gain important information in coming to know others’ practices, problems and ways of coping with their writing. Furthermore, exposure to a diverse group may provide a sounding board and understanding that problems one experiences are similar to those of others, and are not just about one’s own failings. This form of learning, in which there is a mixing and matching on a more or less equivalent basis, of prior experiences of writing, is what Savin-Baden (2008, 54) refers to as ‘dialogic learning’. Such learning, through valuing prior experiences, promotes exploration of new ways of acting. As Moore (2003) points out, if dialogic forms of learning are known to be successful in the classroom, then there is no reason why they should not also be so in writing retreats. This bringing together of diverse participants who bear a variety of methods, knowledge and difficulties about writing and the ensuing dialogicality, is also typical of third space activities (Gutierrez 2008, 154), and is referred to as ‘horizontal development’. In reflecting on the writing retreats which form the focus of this study, participants refer directly to the value of diversity and how this assisted their own development as writers:

Having a diverse group of colleagues provided insight into what I was writing about. It allowed me opportunity to engage with others that are doing similar research.

We could exchange ideas and information ... it was an excellent networking opportunity and I found that I made connections with people from other institutions that helped my writing, either

as similar information or referral to theory/theorists.

These dialogic learning spaces described by participants are, however, not without difficulty; such difficulties are also characteristic of third spaces.

Spaces riven with contradictions, difficulties and challenges

The writing workshops were focussed on the scholarship of teaching and learning (SOTL) and were thus dissimilar from typical disciplinary writing. Staff from faculty may thus experience educational writing retreats as sites of difference and difficulty. As Savin-Baden (2008, 58) suggests, early career writers are often unaware of the hidden rules for text production within their fields and hence not necessarily initially aware that they have ‘transgressed’ into a new field:

I now understand (after the input on the writing retreat) writing for publication (in SOTL) as a different genre with its own conventions.

Commonplace in writing programmes is a sense of inadequacy in which writers wonder if they have something of value to say, often because much has already been said by others with more persuasion (Savin-Baden 2008, 45; Dwyer et al. 2012). This may have negative effects on participants’ ability to write, unless clear guidance is given. Writers often experience themselves as not being good enough and possibly unable to put together a clear or even original account of what they have found out, leading to a sense of incompetency (Moore 2003, 337). Lee and Boud (2003) identify academic writing and programmes associated with this sense of inadequacy, as sites of practice riven with fear and anxiety.

Writing is clearly connected to the formation of an academic identity, and often involves challenging one’s own ideas or taking a stance towards others’ ideas in the field, in other words developing an academic voice (Savin-Baden 2008). In third space literature, this position taken by participants somewhere between the accepted canon and their own lived experiences, is termed ‘sociocritical literacy’ (Gutierrez 2008, 149), and is an essential ability in participants for navigating through such spaces. There is, furthermore, much risk taking involved here, such that academics on writing programme often experience themselves as ‘voiceless’ (Savin-Baden 2008, 65). Many of the workshop participants in this research referred to these sorts of difficulties:

Uncertainty in terms of having anything to contribute and fear of taking on something that I may well fail at completely. I experience guilt at not making the grade.

This feeling of inadequacy as a writer and in finding voice can in some cases be reflected in academics' difficulty in crossing the oral/written divide (Savin-Baden 2008, 45). Participating staff may feel adequate in expressing ideas in conversation; however, writing things down, and thereby exposing themselves more directly to comparison with established writers, may prevent them from actually getting their ideas down on paper:

I feel anxiety over knowing I must shape a coherent written paper out of situations I can talk to very well. A sense of inadequacy until I actually put myself out there (in writing). I know I will do it eventually but also this is a crippling emotion, I think.

This sense of eventually finding themselves able to write, reflects an understanding that writing does not just happen when one sits down to purposefully produce, but that writing happens at some times and not at others. There needs to be a resilience and understanding that writing is something to be 'worked at', struggled with, and that authors can, eventually, experience the sense of 'writing flow' (Savin-Baden 2008, 46). Academics express this in their own descriptions of writing:

I enjoy writing when it works and if I give myself enough thinking and scribbling time it tends to work quite well. I feel strong when I write well, and intelligent. I only feel really frustrated and stupid when I try to write without having immersed myself sufficiently in the literature and data and my own ideas.

As Moore (2003) and Lee and Boud (2003) point out, writing is a profoundly emotional experience related to writers' emerging identity as scholars. In this project writers describe conflicting emotions: sometimes things work well and staff are enthusiastic, but this does not always endure, as new conflicting emotions emerge. As staff report, writing is characterised by emotional flip-flopping; for example, when asked to describe their feelings about the retreats, many staff made these sorts of contradictory comments:

Confusion, excitement.

Enjoyment, frustration, insecurity.

Although staff may initially experience these often difficult and disparate emotive experiences as challenging or even crippling, they also understood that it is possible to overcome or at least deal with these difficulties; and as Moore (2003) observes, this sometimes leads to an enhanced sense of personal accomplishment. In Activity Theory terms, on which the concept of third

spaces is based, it is these difficulties which provide a stimulus for exploration of new ways of doing. As Dwyer et al. (2012, 139) observe, the search for new and often pleasurable ways of writing often arises from difficulties, which are more than just of the moment, but rather arise from historically accumulated tensions in society (Engeström and Sannino 2011). For example, early career staff may understand themselves as deficient in some ways, requiring remediation, which then places pressure on them to produce text. This sense of fear of writing can in part be countered by a sense of wanting to write, knowing that it is possible, which is in turn supported by the collective writing experience (Lee and Boud 2003). The quotes below illustrates something of the journey that staff go through and possibly how, through a combination of structure provided by the mentors and being part of the collective, along with their own desire to become writers (Lee and Boud 2003, 197), it is possible to overcome difficulties.

I used to be very apprehensive about academic writing but after attending the academic training courses and sharing my work with colleagues I feel more confident. Knowing that other academics share similar concerns about writing and are aiming at improving their skills too is a comforting feeling.

and:

Writing, writing and more writing. Sharing my work with other good writers being brave and pushing myself to try new things.

Future orientation

Writing retreats are not just about completing a piece during the away period, but are future looking, posing the question, 'how to do things better in the future' (Moore, Murphy and Murray 2010). A single writing retreat is often insufficient for particularly novice writers to reach some form of completion, and writers often express the need for future, follow up workshops (Grant 2006).

In describing the dynamics of third spaces, Gutierrez (2008) highlights how participants often refer to a future beyond the current space. She characterises this future as often being filled with possibility and intentionality on the part of the participants. In some respects, this can be seen as an outcome of third spaces, that what has arisen through attempting to work through difficulty within the workshops has the potential for further development beyond them. Indicators of possible futures are found in participants' reference to what they hope and wish for in the future, as well as more concrete plans for future developments:

I would have liked to have made greater progress with the article; a follow up workshop would be great later in the year.

I thought my paper was nearly complete but I realised there is still quite a lot to do, I am glad I

realised that here and not from a journal reviewer.

I hope to really start writing. I guess a follow up workshop is a must. Although time was not enough I feel I have made considerable progress.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

In concluding this article, I want to argue that the retreats described here can be characterised as special sorts of learning spaces or third spaces. In the literature, such spaces are characterised by their hybridity, or their bringing together of difference. This can be seen on two levels: firstly, there is the difference in participants who come from different institutions and fields, and present different takes on theory and practice; there is also the difference of working with more experienced academics, which is something participants on the retreat clearly valued. Secondly, there are the differences that staff themselves experience in their orientation to writing, the conflicting emotions of achievement and failure, and their continual quest to overcome this, as they attempt to develop an authorial voice.

The writing retreats are also dialogically rich in that participants work with one another reciprocally, through giving and receiving feedback (Lee and Boud 2003). This dialogicity operates at different levels. Firstly, it allows participating staff to share common concerns and difficulties which act as props, in that academics can come to understand that many of the problems they encounter are commonly and widely experienced, rather than individual to them. Secondly, the collective itself can be a source of possible solutions to writing difficulties or blocks. Here, one should include the mentors, who are also part of the collaborative writing group. Thirdly, the group helps to create a collective intentionality or purpose, that of getting writing done.

Even though participating staff experienced difficulty in writing, often seeing themselves as not good enough or experiencing conflicting emotions (fear/excitement), they were often able to overcome these difficulties. Working alone, these difficulties may appear insurmountable, but when experienced within the supportive and structured environment of these writing retreats, they can be instrumental in opening up reflective spaces. Rather than being seen as impediments, the difficulties may be reinterpreted as opportunities. Through reflection, staff are able to question what they are currently doing and envisage new ways of acting. The workshop participants thus, as seen through the lens of third spaces, enter a zone of learning and development, often referred to as a zone of proximal development. In Activity terms they are working on the raw material or object of the activity, that of producing text. This work is in turn made possible through the use of mediating artefacts in the form of the supportive writing group, and structured input on writing offered by the presenters. Such

mediating artefacts are deliberately inserted into the retreat to assist learning and development.

Apart from such artefacts, there are other resources that can be supplied to mediate learning and development within a third space framework. Collaborative work as a mediating artefact is one means to help staff deal with these difficulties: here it is argued that it may help to intervene, and actually provide participants with an understanding of how best to give helpful and supportive feedback to each other, for example, through concentrating on significant issues and attempting to understand and work within the other's framework (Boud and Molloy 2013).

Turning now to the more emotive aspects of writing, Lord Percy, the pre-war British education minister, famously stated that schooling should not be a happy experience as students 'should be brought up to expect unhappiness' (*The Economist* 2016, 60). Though this is a somewhat dystopian view of the worth of education, it does raise the point of preparing writers for future difficulty. In a similar vein, if contradictory emotions about writing are in fact typical of writing experiences, as Moore (2003) and Dwyer et al. (2012) suggest, then perhaps writers should be made more conscious of these difficulties, so that they can be better prepared. Participants could, for example, engage in structured reflection as to why they experience themselves as inadequate, or why they experience strongly conflicting emotions about writing, in advance of the retreat.

Savin-Baden (2008, 45) goes so far as to suggest that experiencing contradictory emotions in academic writing is often a first step in developing an academic writing voice. This suggests that mentors' proposing and developing the concept of the writer's voice might help participating writers to navigate their conflicting feelings. Voice is proposed as the core idea – that begins as an initial, poorly-formed bridging concept between the writer's own ideas and understandings, and those predominant in the field (Savin-Baden 2008). In Activity terms, the introduction of this kind of strategically developed bridging concept to help participants work with difficulty, is known as a 'germ cell' (Engeström and Sannino 2011). Developing voice may be experienced as initially difficult or even conflicting by participants, encompassing what Gutierrez (2008, 149) refers to as the essential sociocritical literacies required to work in third spaces. Academic writing voice could then be successively developed within the third space/ZPD of the writing retreat, towards becoming a more substantive means for staff to navigate through their writing difficulties.

Characterising writing retreats as third spaces can thus open up possibilities as to how such retreats could be more effectively constructed, with particular reference to the difficulties and often contradictory emotions experienced by staff.

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